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## From Salvation to Empowerment: European Notes on Contemporary American Religion

Jan N. Bremmer

Where could I, as a Dutch professor of religious studies, better study American religion than in Los Angeles?<sup>1</sup> It may seem surprising, given the Hollywood and Californian image of a less than religious lifestyle, but, in addition to being the 1906 birthplace of Pentecostalism, the fastest growing Christian denomination of this moment, L.A. is home to the largest American archdiocese of the Catholic church, the largest Hindu shrine of the nation, the second largest temple of the Mormons, the third largest population of Jews, and the greatest variety of Buddhists in the world. Last, and perhaps to some readers least, it was the Bible Institute of Los Angeles that in 1909 published *The Fundamentals*, whose defense of the traditional conservative interpretation of the Bible gave us the term *fundamentalism*.

Historians now generally agree regarding the “master narrative” of American religion: it has been shaped predominantly by the non-ritualistic mainstream Protestant churches (Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists, and Baptists).<sup>2</sup> These churches minimized dogmatic discussions and offered more opportunities for the enterprising, egalitarian, and often anti-intellectual ethos of much of the American population.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, these churches also helped to propagate the notion of “being chosen,” promoted the idea of America’s having a “mission for the world,” embraced the consumer society, and were responsible for the close intertwining of religion and patriotism. Finally, these churches dominated the scene before the arrival of the Jews

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution is a revised and elaborated portion of my inaugural lecture “Religion, Ritual, and Festivals: From Ancient Greece to Contemporary America, via the Enlightenment,” delivered as the first Getty Villa Professor on October 5, 2006. I thank Justin Kroesen and Yme Kuiper for their comments, Kristina Meinking for her corrections, and Carolyn Gray Anderson for stimulating discussions.

<sup>2</sup> For the historiography of American religion see M. Hochgeschwender, “Religion, nationale Mythologie und nationale Identität. Zu den methodischen und inhaltlichen Debatten in der amerikanischen ‘New Religious History,’” *Historisches Jahrbuch* 124 (2004), pp. 435–520; J. Butler, “Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History,” *Journal of American History* 90 (2004), pp. 1357–1378.

<sup>3</sup> M. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism. Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1991), pp. 99–121, notes that evangelical scholarship was long dependent on the British for publishers and training.

and the Catholics in the form of the Irish, Italian, Polish, and Latin American immigrants from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, and still constitute the religious majority. Experience teaches that the dominant culture always exerts a certain influence on minorities, and it is not so different in religion.

So, what is the present situation in contemporary American religion? Limiting myself in these pages to some aspects that have struck me as particularly interesting during my stay in the U.S. between September 2006 and June 2007, I would say, to start with, that religion is quite simply a highly important part of American life and culture. The most recent survey of American religion found that still about ninety percent of Americans claim a religious affiliation, a figure that has been relatively constant for the last fifty years.<sup>4</sup> This percentage is astonishing when compared with Europe, where, with the exception of Ireland and Poland, the outlook for religious practice is much bleaker, with regular participation falling below fifty percent, and only about twenty-five percent still believing in a personal God. In this respect nothing seems to have changed since De Tocqueville observed that America “is still the place in the world where the Christian religion has most preserved genuine powers over souls.”<sup>5</sup>

What explains this striking difference with Europe? Why has the wave of secularization affecting Europe not overwhelmed the U.S.? One reason must be that for a long time American churches were in strong competition with one another. Whereas in Europe nearly all countries have an established church, such as the Anglicans in Great Britain, the Lutherans in Scandinavia, and the Roman Catholics in Spain and Italy, American churches had to compete with one another, a struggle that kept them on their toes.<sup>6</sup> It was not only that they competed with other churches but, from the drive-in churches that started in the 1950s to the television broadcasts and

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<sup>4</sup> *American Piety in the 21st Century*, a 74-page survey published online by the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, September 2006: <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/33304.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by H.C. Mansfield and D. Winthrop (Chicago, 2000), p. 278.

<sup>6</sup> This aspect is much (if not over-) stressed by R. Finke and R. Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2005).

megachurches of today, churches have always been keen to learn from the best marketing techniques of the secular world.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the amazing growth of megachurches, of which the number has doubled in the last five years and of which some of the best known are in California (namely, the Crystal Cathedral and Saddleback Community Church, both in Orange County), is one of the most interesting phenomena of the last decade and already influencing the worship practices of other churches.<sup>8</sup> An audience accustomed to the sophistication of the modern mass media no longer wants old-fashioned worship on Sundays, but rather value for money, and that is what they get in megachurches. Not only is the music up-to-date and the congregation more involved than in traditional churches, but there is much more room for innovation than in my own Parish of Saint Matthew Episcopal Church in Pacific Palisades. For example, in the New Life Church in Colorado, which was founded by the recently ousted pastor Ted Haggard, each Easter “the sanctuary is transformed into a theater for an extravagant passion play with a cast of hundreds, live animals, Cirque du Soleil-style acrobats portraying angels—and special effects worthy of Broadway.”<sup>9</sup> This clearly contrasts with the standardized and low-key performance of the Sunday service of my own parish, however plainly wonderful its clergy and its music really are.

The fact that Haggard preached his first sermon in an unfinished basement brings to light another defining characteristic: the entrepreneurial culture of the U.S. Whereas in Europe churches are increasingly transformed into shops, in the U.S. shops are transformed into storefront churches.<sup>10</sup> It can be no coincidence that the pastors of these megachurches often began small but worked themselves up, thanks to their personal charisma. Witness pastors Rick Warren of Saddleback, whose *The Purpose Driven Life* has sold over thirteen million copies, and Robert Schuller of the striking

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<sup>7</sup> See the wonderful study by R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God* (New York, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> J. Lampman, “‘Megachurches’ way of worship is on the rise,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 6, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> S. Simon, “Church ousts pastor for ‘immoral’ acts,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 2006, p. A13.

<sup>10</sup> For an interesting example that also illuminates the rise of Pentecostalism, see D. Gonzales, “A Sliver of a Storefront, A Faith on the Rise,” *New York Times*, January 14, 2007.

Crystal Cathedral, whose televised *Hour of Power* can be watched even in the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, these megachurches often sponsor small groups to compensate for the size of the Sunday services. In fact, meeting in small groups is a growing phenomenon in American culture and religion that transcends the individual denominations and religions.<sup>12</sup> In my own parish, smaller groups of parishioners concentrate on yoga, Christian values, spiritual growth, and reading spiritual books, among other activities. At the same time, these groups create a warm intimacy in a world that is often cold—even here in California. Naturally, such big churches (but also small groups) must find a common ground to remain together. In that respect, cohesion is greatly facilitated by the fact that in the last decades we have seen the denominational boundaries greatly lowered, judgmental tendencies diminished, and the importance attached to dogma and doctrine gradually, if not rapidly, disappearing.<sup>13</sup> In general, despite parading religion, Americans wear their religious beliefs lightly.

By the same token, it is not so easy to see how this development squares with another trend in American religion: the growing stress on the Bible as the word of God. In ancient Greece, for example, books played no role in mainstream religion, only in the teaching of marginal groups, such as the Orphics. That situation was typical of all ancient religion, but changed after the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem in 70 AD, when the text of the Torah became sacred and the Hebrew Bible a Holy Book—shortly after to be followed by the Christians, whose popularity in Persia led the Zoroastrians to codify the text of their sacred book, the *Avesta*.<sup>14</sup> The importance of

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<sup>11</sup> For Warren and Saddleback, see J.L. Sheler, *Believers: A Journey into Evangelical America* (New York, 2006), pp. 114–141; for Schuller, see F.M. Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West* (Tucson, AZ, 2000), pp. 185–191.

<sup>12</sup> See A. Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion* (New York, 2003), index s.v. small groups; R. Wuthnow, *All in Sync: How Music and Art Are Revitalizing American Religion* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 2003), pp. 114–122. The popularity of this approach also becomes immediately manifest when Googling keywords *small groups*.

<sup>13</sup> A. Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion* (Oxford 2001).

<sup>14</sup> A.S. van der Woude, “Pluriformity and Uniformity. Reflections on the Transmission of the Text of the Old Testament,” in J.N. Bremmer and F. García Martínez, eds., *Sacred History and Sacred Texts in Early Judaism* (Kampen, 1992), pp. 151–169 (on *Torah*); Bremmer, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife* (London and New York, 2002), p. 50 (on *Avesta*); G. Stroumsa, *La Fin du sacrifice* (Paris, 2005), pp. 63–101 (on *Torah, Bible*).

the Bible as Holy Book in contemporary American culture is demonstrated by the fact that nearly half of all Americans define themselves as “Bible-believing.”<sup>15</sup> Yet it is only in the twentieth century, with the rise of fundamentalism, that we witness the growing stress on the literal meaning of the biblical text in this country.<sup>16</sup> Although its roots are to be found in the Reformation, such an interpretation becomes visible first in England, and only after the period 1630–1650 when the terms *literalism*, *literalist*, *literality*, and *literalness* were coined.<sup>17</sup> The advantages of such an approach are clear: it is not intellectually demanding, it provides certainty in an uncertain world, and it appeals to the ideal of self-reliance that is so typical of American culture.

However the American “spirit” may be characterized, in addition to competitive, innovative, and entrepreneurial, there is, to be sure, an element of spirituality in these practices. The concentration on seeking, on the self, on self-realization, and on a harmonious relationship with nature, which we usually associate with New Age spirituality,<sup>18</sup> no longer stops for the gates of the establishment and the churches. Recently, a good case has been made that even an icon of the media, Oprah Winfrey, knows how to cleverly mix capitalism and spirituality via her talk show and her *O* magazine.<sup>19</sup> Where certain critics use the term “prosperity theology” in connection with Christian pastors that propagate Christianity as the road to health, wealth, and material success, so we could apply the term “prosperity spirituality” to Oprah’s message. Yet to focus on the materialistic side of modern spirituality would overlook other, perhaps more interesting developments.

One of the best specialists of contemporary American religion, Robert Wuthnow, has recently stressed the connection between spirituality, music, and the visual arts. The “noise” of postmodern artists sometimes drowns out the art of religious communities

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<sup>15</sup> *American Piety in the 21st Century*, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> For recent interesting anthropological studies of the literal-mindedness of fundamentalism see S. Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); and V. Crapanzano, *Serving the Word. Literalism in America from the Pulpit to the Bench* (New York, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> P. Burke, “The Rise of Literal-Mindedness (An Essay),” *Common Knowledge* 2 (1993), pp. 108–121.

<sup>18</sup> For its nineteenth-century American roots, see L.E. Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> K. Lofton, “Practicing Oprah; or, The Prescriptive Compulsion of a Spiritual Capitalism,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 39 (2006), pp. 599–621; see also E. Robinson, “The Church of Oprah,” *Washington Post* (May 10, 2005), A21.

and their buildings, which includes altar carvings and retables, statues, ornate pulpits, tapestries (think of the wonderful examples in L.A.'s Cathedral of our Lady of the Angels), and stained glass windows—in addition to the sometimes striking churches, temples, and mosques themselves.<sup>20</sup> Among the European intellectual elite, art often has taken the place of religion. That replacement is typical of the post-Enlightenment development of the western world and is hardly found outside it.<sup>21</sup> Yet in the U.S. art is increasingly incorporated into spirituality within and outside the churches. The continued visits to the museums by young children and students, the so-called “visual generation”, has made them receptive to the various expressions of art, and as adults they are able to give the experience of art a place in their spirituality.<sup>22</sup> It is this trend that may contribute to an explanation of the great, and well-deserved, success of the recent J. Paul Getty Museum exhibition *Icons from Sinai*, which drew more than 230,000 visitors in only sixteen weeks. Those Byzantine icons with their ancient origins and suggestive sacredness, which traveled from the remote desert to the ultra civilized Getty, clearly appeal to the modern need for meditation and moving experiences, whether one is religious or not.

Indeed, social anthropologists have noted that spiritual experience, with its concomitant stress on prayer, which seems more important in the U.S. than in Europe, is becoming increasingly vital. People “fall in love with Jesus,” and they want God as an intimate “friend.” He is there for you, and He can be asked for advice and support. In other words, it is empowerment rather than salvation that is becoming important. This development seems to straddle religious divides, as we also find it in New Age and the Jewish Chabad movement.<sup>23</sup> The need for personal empowerment fits well in an American society in which more citizens live alone than ever before and where social capital is on the wane, as Robert Putnam argued in his famous *Bowling Alone*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> D. Morgan and S.M. Promey, eds., *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> A. Gell, *Art and Agency* (Oxford, 1998), p. 97.

<sup>22</sup> See Wuthnow, *All in Sync*.

<sup>23</sup> T. Luhrmann, “Metakinesis: How God Becomes Intimate in Contemporary U.S. Christianity,” *American Anthropologist* 106 (2004), pp. 518–528.

<sup>24</sup> R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, 2000); and R. Putnam, ed., *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society* (New York, 2002).

With this “experiential turn” I have come to the end of my observations. American religion seems to be moving in a more individualistic direction toward “communities lite,” reflecting trends within American society as a whole. The longer churches and religious communities have a presence in the U.S., the more they become assimilated to mainline American (religious) culture. That is why the developments I have sketched cut across religions and denominations. Nowhere can we expect a return to the practices that prevailed in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. But to find the right balance between individualism and active participation in the wider community will be a challenge to us all.